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THIS WEEK'S NEWS FROM

Inside Washington

Did 'Post' Provoke Stethem's Murder?

The Washington *Post's* lead story on June 15 reported the murder of Robert Stethem, the Navy diver brutally killed by the hijackers of TWA Flight 847 and dumped onto the tarmac at the Beirut airport.

When the control tower operator stressed it was "a shame" to kill an innocent passenger, a hijacker replied: "Did you forget the Bir al Abed massacre?" referring to the March 8 car bombing in a Beirut suburb that killed more than 80 Shi'ite Moslems. The *Post* then noted: "Shi'ites have accused the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency of being behind the bombing, which the CIA has denied."

What the *Post* failed to remind its readers, writes columnist Reed Irvine, was that on May 12, 1985, it had carried a lead story, with a banner headline across the top of Page 1, claiming the March 8 car bombing had been implemented by a counterterrorist unit trained and supported by the CIA.

Written by Bob Woodward and Charles Babcock, the story described the bombing as "a runaway mission" carried out by individuals without CIA authorization. And while not directly blaming the bombing on the CIA, the story described the agency as having "an indirect connection" to it.

Said Irvine: "Government officials and intelligence experts were appalled by the irresponsibility of the *Post* story charging the CIA with even an indirect connection with the bombing.

"One official said: 'The Washington *Post* has put the lives of every American in Lebanon in jeopardy. . . . I find it utterly contemptible. . . . It invites retaliation against every American in Beirut, including women and children. The *Post* did that with the foreknowledge of that possibility. They were warned.' After the story appeared, the State Department issued an alert to U.S. diplomats abroad warning of new terrorist threats."

George V. Lauder, public affairs director for the CIA, furiously responded to the *Post* on June 23. In a letter to the editor, Lauder replied:

"In its lead news article May 12, the *Post* alleged that the CIA had 'an indirect connection' to the March 8 car bombing in Beirut which killed more than 80 people and wounded many others.

"Before the story was published, the CIA categorically denied to the *Post* reporters any involvement, direct or indirect, in the bombing.

Moreover, in a statement immediately after the story appeared, the agency publicly denied any connection with this event.

"The House Select Committee on Intelligence (HSCI) investigated the *Post* story and inter alia reported to the full House on June 12 that:

"The committee's review has uncovered no evidence that any U.S. intelligence agency — any U.S. government agency — has encouraged or participated in any terrorist activity in Lebanon. Further, the committee was able to discover no evidence that any U.S. intelligence agency had foreknowledge of the March 8 bombing outside the residence of Sheik Hussein Fadlallah.

"Without addressing the specifics of the allegations raised in connection with this deplorable terrorist event, the committee states that its review of relevant documents and files and its interview of appropriate government officials lead to the conclusion that no U.S. government complicity, direct or indirect, can be established with respect to the March 8 bombing in Beirut."

"The CIA regrets that the *Post* ignored our denial of any involvement in the March 8 Beirut incident and that its article gave the American public and the rest of the world the false impression that the U.S. government was involved in terrorist activity. This misleading theme has been picked up by other journalists as fact and has even been cited by the Shiite terrorists as one of the motives for the hijacking of TWA Flight 847."